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C.I.A. Is at Last Con

By RICHARD BURT

WASHINGTON — Like the warships he used to command, Adm. Stansfield Turner has come through an arduous shakedown cruise as the Carter Administration's director of Central Intelligence. It is too early to suggest that he has returned safely to port, but his ability to stay afloat is no small accomplishment.

When he was appointed 17 months ago to head the Central Intelligence Agency, the former naval officer found himself with a troubled organization. Public confidence had been shaken by revelations of illegal activities at home and "dirty tricks" abroad while petty bureaucratic jealousies that had been allowed to fester for years undermined the agency's effectiveness. Admiral Turner talks confidently, as he did in an interview last week, about how under him the agency is on its way to winning back respect. His manner was characteristically blunt, but given recent events it may be hard to understand the self-assurance.

The agency has come under attack, especially from White House assistants who maintain that it should have predicted the turmoil that has swept Iran, and who complain that they still do not have adequate information on the Moslem fundamentalists who are challenging the power of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlavi. Less crucial perhaps, but still distracting, is the way Admiral Turner has been embroiled in disputes involving former agency employees.

One that could affect the agency's future dealings with former workers was the suit against Frank W. Sneyd 3d, whose book, "Decent Interval," chronicled C.I.A. bungling in the United States evacuation of South Vietnam three years ago. Last week, William Kampiles, a former agency clerk, was found guilty of selling the Russians a manual on the KH-11 reconnaissance satellite. An expert on strategic arms, David S. Sullivan, was dismissed after he was suspected of passing secrets to an aide to Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, a hardliner on negotiations for a new arms treaty with the Soviet Union.

These difficulties followed even rougher going in Admiral Turner's first few months, when it seemed that every step he took made matters worse. Morale, already battered, hit rock-bottom after he decided to dismiss 800 employees, many of them espionage operatives and senior staff members. Normally secretive agency officials suddenly began complaining to news reporters about the admiral's "aloofness," his style of management, which seemed cutthroat to them, and his apparent preference for the advice of former naval aides.

Other senior foreign policy officials were antagonized by Admiral Turner's eagerness to grab control of the Pentagon's intelligence services and by what some described as his desire to influence policy on such sensitive issues as the withdrawal of United States forces from South Korea. His obvious ambition and his close to President Carter, a former classmate at Annapolis, whom he sees at least once a week, even produced suggestions, both in and out of government, that a controversial agency study on world oil production had been tailored to support White House energy policies.

For all the complaints, though, there are reasons to believe that the worst is over for both Admiral Turner and his agency. Morale at the headquarters in Langley, Va. seems to have improved, in part, the director's aides say, because of efforts to get him to meet with staff members. He now tries to have lunch with members of various offices once or twice a week. Admiral Turner says he enjoys these "bull sessions," but in typical fashion declares, "I'm not about to start a glad-handing campaign just to make people feel better around here."

More important to morale, he insists, is a general easing that has taken place in the criticism directed at the agency. To him, "all the beating this place took in recent years was exactly the same that the military took after Vietnam."

It also helped that Frank Carlucci took over early this year as deputy director, handling the day-to-day management of the agency. Mr. Carlucci had done well in sensitive Government jobs, most recently as the United States Ambassador to Portugal, where he is said to have played a critical role in helping establish a democratic government in 1976. He possesses both the tact and personal insight that his boss is said to lack. Admiral Turner denies reports that he was forced to accept Mr. Carlucci, and in the interview acknowledged that his deputy had "taken a tremendous load off my shoulders."

Even if operations are smoother at Langley, the admiral remains a controversial figure within the Carter Administration at large. His relations with members of the White House staff are tense, and he is known to have locked horns frequently with David Aaron, deputy to national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and a key intelligence aide. As a one-time staff member for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Mr. Aaron, as well as the Senator he had worked for, Walter F. Mondale, became a keen skeptic of the agency's scapability.

One main objection among some policymakers is that the agency persistently has failed to anticipate critical developments. The turmoil in Iran is cited as a prime example, and this purported failing, it is argued, has narrowed the policy opinions available to Mr. Carter.

Admiral Turner, however, replied last week that in most cases the agency had been made the fall guy for the mistakes of others. "We're an easy scapegoat," he said, "because if we miss one, we can't explain what happened." But in discussing the events in Iran, he conceded that "we would have liked to have done better," and disclosed that a new C.I.A. post for "warning," had been created to concentrate resources on future trouble spots.

On the delicate issue of his relations with President Carter, the admiral strongly rejected the notion that he often has tried to influence the outcome of policy debates. But he added that if asked for his opinion on a possible course of action, he is not afraid to speak his mind. "If somebody asks me what I think," he said, "like any red-blooded chap, I'm not going to sit on my hands."

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